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ABSTRACT

The paper points out the problem of social isolation and rejection experienced by individual children or minority groups who lack particular knowledge and skills. Social isolation is conceptualized as a social process in development. Inclusion and exclusion skills are discussed in terms of the implications for peer interaction and relationships among children who differ in values, skills, and personal experience. It is proposed that special education presents a challenge to educators and researchers to help children achieve positive peer relations in the classroom. Several research projects are presented in which social skills, peer relations, and intervention methods were investigated. A study on children's literature and social learning receives major focus. The investigator's research on coaching social skills is evaluated for application by educators. (Author/SBH)

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Coaching Children in Social Skills for Positive Peer Relations

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Abstract

Social isolation is conceptualized as a social process in development. Inclusion and exclusion skills are discussed in terms of the implications for peer interaction and relationships among children who differ in values, skills, and personal experience. It is proposed that special education presents a challenge to educators and researchers to help children achieve positive peer relations in the classroom. Several research projects are presented in which social skills, peer relations, and intervention methods were investigated. A study on children's literature and social learning receives major focus. The investigator's research on coaching social skills is evaluated for application by educators.

Coaching Children in Social Skills for Positive Peer Relations

Educators and researchers have frequently assumed that social isolation and rejection is the problem of individual children or minority groups who lack particular knowledge and skills. We further assume that if these children were to gain the skills they lack, they would be included and accepted by children who have previously ignored or rejected them. In our research at the University of Rochester, which I will discuss, we have met with progress in the development of social skill instruction with children who have been socially isolated or rejected by peers. However, the future direction of special education challenges us to examine our assumptions and to define social learning directions for all children.

The problem of social isolation is not only the problem of particular individuals and groups. Everyone experiences social isolation either for a period of time or in particular situations or circumstances throughout development. Social rebuffs may be viewed as integral to social encounters and relationships. Acts of exclusion between persons serve to communicate the existence of displeasure, discomfort, or disinterest. We frequently encounter situations in which people are unfamiliar to us or appear to be quite different from us. We may learn to be inclusive toward persons whose experiences and perspectives differ from our own. Or, we may become increasingly skillful at excluding others. Social isolation may thus be conceptualized as a process of social exclusion. In our work, we often find a child who has become highly skillful at excluding herself or himself from peer interactions with the result that intervention approaches are quite limited. On the other hand, a child's peers may often respond with exclusionary tactics.

In the classroom, the consequences of continued social isolation may present more problems for some children than for others. For example, in a

recent study with third- and fifth-grade children (Ladd & Oden, 1977), children were individually interviewed and asked to suggest ways they could help another child in various situations and ways that another child could help them in the same situations. We found that children who received low ratings from classmates on sociometric measures also tended to suggest strategies which were unique or different from the kinds of suggestions made by their classmates. In contrast, children who were highly rated by peers gave few unique or different strategies. In addition, there was a high degree of consensus among children about the strategies which would be helpful for each situation. It was thus surprising that some children could be so unaware of their peer norms and values. Apparently, when children are isolated or rejected, whatever the original reasons, they have limited resources for gaining social understanding and knowledge.

The problem of social isolation thus requires that educators and researchers learn more about the processes of exclusion and inclusion as children interact in the classroom. Much evidence has been documented which indicates that simply providing common territory and experiences does not necessarily result in children including and accepting each other (e.g., Asher, Oden, & Gottman, 1977). Too often we find ourselves appealing to children's good will by providing them with platitudes when skills are required to overcome stereotypes, communicate and problem solve, and create a cooperative environment. We can begin by building from the types of curriculum we already provide in our classrooms toward curriculum which will contribute to all children's social and intellectual development.

Social Skill Learning in the Classroom

We have just completed a study in two classrooms with six- and seven-year-old children who were provided with a children's literature curriculum with emphasis on social learning (Oden & Moss, 1978). The curriculum was based on

a central theme which provides a framework which Moss (1978) originally proposed and termed the focus unit. We first instructed the teachers on criterion for selection of children's literature for the focus units. Two different focus units were developed for use in both classrooms. One focus unit centered on friendship development and getting along with others who appear to be different in some way. The other focus unit centered on the factual and fictional adventures of bears who coped with various events, but social relationships were not a focus.

The teachers were then instructed on criterion for selection of questions to suggest to the children for discussion after each story. The questions which were developed varied from literal to inferential and probed the children's understanding of the elements of the narrative structure including the setting, character, plot, and the authors' use of language, logic, and inference. Finally, children would be asked to discuss the relevance of the story to their personal experience and to the classroom.

The teachers were also provided with instruction in a social skill training method referred to in previous research by this investigator as a social skill "coaching" method (Oden & Asher, 1977). Briefly, verbal instruction in social concepts such as cooperation and communication and specific behavioral examples are discussed and verbally rehearsed. The specific examples are then evaluated for their appropriateness and likely social outcomes. Along with opportunities for practicing social skills with peers and a postplay review, this verbal instruction method was found to be effective in increasing the peer acceptance of children who had been socially isolated or rejected by peers. These gains increased or were maintained by the instructed children even one year later compared to comparison and control groups who made no significant gains. In the present study, teachers were encouraged to utilize this verbal instruction

method with reference to several key concepts from the stories. Teachers were encouraged, however, to conduct the group discussion in a conversational style.

In the group which received the friendship focus unit, the stories provided a common vocabulary and experience for discussion of making, building, and maintaining positive peer relations and friendships. For example, with reference to a story about a whale and a mouse, Amos and Boris (Steig, 1971), the teacher asked, "How did Amos and Boris learn about each other?" and for another story about a duck and a bear, "How did Duck and Bear solve their differences so they could still be friends?" (Delton, 1974). The structure of the narrative even in the focus unit on bears, however, provided natural material for discussion of motivation, problem solving, and differences in individual perspectives. Thus, in both focus units, children are asked to consider how characters and their viewpoints differed. It is important to realize that stories are interesting to us largely because they concern human motivation and problems in living. Furthermore, the narrative allows for the evaluation of different consequences of various behaviors within a given story or when comparing two stories. For example, in Let's be Enemies (Udry, 1961), the teacher asks, "How do you think John felt when James always wanted to be the boss?" In contrast, with Here Comes the Strikeout, (Kessler, 1965), the children discuss how Willy helped his friend to gain confidence and skill in playing baseball.

In each classroom, two focus unit groups, the bear and friend focus units, were formed from a random selection of children with the qualification that each group of 7 or 8 children included nearly equal numbers of children with above and below average peer acceptance. A third group was also formed in the same way in each classroom and these children listened to the same stories as the other two groups, but no time for group discussion was provided. The teachers

were observed throughout the study on a random basis to ensure that they maintained the defining features of the three story groups. For all three story groups, there were eight 30-minute story sessions spread out over a 2-month period. Pre- and posttest data was collected including sociometric ratings and friendship nominations, behavioral observations in the classroom, and language and story comprehension measures. While these data are currently being assessed, gains were obtained in mutual liking ratings and in friendship nominations by the majority of children in each classroom. Additional gains were made by children in the friendship and bear focus unit groups between the children in each group. In contrast, the children in the stories only group made no gains or declined in their mutual liking of each other and in friendships.

Of further interest, it appears that the bear focus unit sociometric findings are highly similar to the friendship focus unit group. Apparently, the content of the focus unit per se in not as important as the communication process and discussion which was largely focused on the structure of the narrative. Further research is needed to evaluate the relative contributions of these experiences to children's social learning. In addition, children who were lowly rated by peers in each focus unit group did make some gains in peer acceptance, but these gains tended to come from a few children rather than from classmates in general. This finding indicates that children who are low in general peer acceptance may benefit from individual social skill learning experiences. The teachers in this study have subsequently found that the context of independent reading and individual discussions is helpful to many children. Even popular children who appear to lack understanding or appreciation of other children's perspectives may benefit from this approach. All children also can receive further learning by extending the theme of a focus unit into language arts experiences such as writing stories, creative arts, dramatics projects, and independent reading.

The teachers also report that the social skill instruction method was often useful in other curriculum activities. Ladd (1978) recently conducted a study which demonstrated that children can learn specific social skills which generalize to free play situations from instruction in small groups prior to structured game play in which a guided rehearsal of the social skills is also included. Ladd employed a social skill training model which included three basic treatment variables--instruction, rehearsal, and feedback. He proposed that social skill training models can be tailor-made for individual children and classroom groups by systematically specifying the treatment variables and varying the content, sequence, and emphasis according to the given social skill objectives.

More research is needed to evaluate the application of various social skill training procedures in educational settings. However, from our consultant sessions with individual children and small groups, we can provide some guidelines. First, I would like to read a brief example from a social skill instruction script with examples of typical responses from a child:

Adult: Do you know what cooperation is? Can you tell me in your own words?

Child: Ahh. . . sharing.

Adult: Yes, sharing. Okay, let's say you and I are playing the game you played last time. What would be an example of sharing when playing the marbles game?

Child: I'd let you use some marbles too.

Adult: Right. You would share the marbles with me. That's an example of cooperation. Now let's say you and I are playing the marbles game. Can you also give me an example of what would <u>not</u> be cooperation?

Child: Taking all the marbles.

Adult: So, do you think that taking all the marbles would make the game fun for both you and I to play?

Child: No!

We have found that even a well engineered script can fall flat if delivered in a lecture style by the adult. To achieve an effective communication process between teacher and child, the teacher or adult has to have the key concepts and specific examples for each concept well in mind. The child is first instructed with an inductive approach toward reaching a general understanding of these concepts. The child is then encouraged or directed to deduce specific examples. The adult's direction may be in the form of asking for positive and opposite examples, providing corrective feedback on the examples the child suggests, and suggesting alternative examples. Finally, the child is encouraged to evaluate the likely social outcomes of specific strategies for different social situations and is asked to report back after actually trying out some of the examples to further discuss their effectiveness or relevance. Thus, the child's task is to develop skill as a cognizer, planner, and evaluator of his social encounters. Again, it is especially important to learn to provide this kind of social skill training in a discussion which is conversational rather than a lecture style. The adult or teacher should avoid the role of judge or disciplinarian, but rather assume the role of a guide who is a supportive and knowledgable adult.

In summary, social skill training methods can be integrated into academic curricula or can be built around curricula and classroom activities to further all children's learning. On a final note, I would like to share with you a story told to us by a second-grade child in the posttest assessment phase of the children's literature and social learning study. This child was a member

of the friendship focus unit group. The child was shown a drawing of a frog and a bug looking at each other with personified expressions. The story, I hope, illustrates the potential of this type of curricula for children of diverse cultural and personal experiences to learn to positively interact with each other.

Once upon a time, there was a frog. And there was a bug, too. The frog liked the bug, but the bug didn't like the frog. One day the bug was walking by. Frog was sitting on a chair out in the grass. Bug didn't look at the frog that much. Frog stared at the bug. But frog turned his head and then bug turned his head facing the frog. Frog said, "Hello bug. How are you doing?" said the frog.

"Not very well," said the bug. "Im just walking down the field, finding some things to eat."

"Oh," said the frog, "Can I help you?"

"That's okay, I'll just wander around."

"Well, on your way back, I'll see you," said the frog.

So the bug ran off, picking things and eating them on the way back. On the way back, Frog was not sitting on a chair. The chair was just sitting there. But then all of a sudden Frog was coming with some tea and a set of cups. "Would you like some tea, Bug?"

"Okay. Would you like some green wheat I found?"

"Oh, no thank you. Oh, there's a fly! I'll go run and eat it." So frog ran off and ate it. Frog came back and says "Well, I'll pour you a cup of tea. Tell me when to stop." So he pours Bug a cup of tea.

The bug drinks the tea and says, "Oh, awful good tea, Mr. Frog. Do you have a different name than Mr. Frog?"

"You can just call me Frog. Do you have a different name, Mr. Bug?"

"No, just call me Bug as you did when we first met."

"Okay."

And so, all of a sudden they just kept drinking tea and drinking tea until it was all gone. And then when it was all gone they had to go home to eat supper. So bug ran off and frog saw another fly. He goes to get the fly and then he gets his canned flys and gets them out for supper. Then the next day, they came and had more tea and it went over and over again, just like the first day, and then it went over and over again the next day. So then they made friends, and then they made good friends. And then they stayed friends and they learned something--that not being a friend when someone likes you--that you can like them too. The end.[1]

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Footnote

[1]The author is Shelley Seton, The Harley School.